

Am I allowed to have an Opinion?

This weeks reading is from *Parsahat Shelach Lecha (Bamidbar / Numbers 13:1-15:41)* the Lord commands Moshe to send men to spy out the land of Canaan which He was giving to the Children of Israel (13:1-2). Moshe sends twelve men to spy out the land saying יְהוָה וְיִרְאִיתֶם אֶת-הָאָרֶץ יהוה ויראיתם את-הארץ 13:18 *‘See what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many. (NASB)* So Moshe essentially gives them the orders to spy the land and see what the people look like and to estimate the people of Canaan capability for war. According to the Torah, the men go to see whether the land is fat or lean, if the camps are well fortified or open, how strong the people are, and whether the land is flowing with milk and honey (זִבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבַשׁ הוּא) and very plentiful? Having sent the men out (Shelach Lecha, שלח לך), the men return from spying out the land giving their opinion of the land and the inhabitants. They brought a good report of the land being filled with milk and honey and a bad report of the inhabitants who live in the land (13:32). In addition, Caleb and Joshua stood up before the people and said the land is good, plentiful, and filled with milk and honey, and if the Lord is pleased with us He will give the land to them, only do not rebel against the Lord and do not fear the people of the land for they will be their prey (14:7-9). As a result of the bad report, the people wept all night long and grumbled against Moshe and Aaron. The congregation of people wanted to stone Caleb and Joshua (14:10).

The Lord calls the leaders of the tribes to go ahead of the congregation to lead the way for the people, to spy out the land, and ultimately for the leadership to encourage the people in the way of the Lord God (*encouragement in the plans God has for them and to walk according to His commands*). The leaders however return from spying out the Land with a fearful report rather than a report of encouragement. According to the Torah Portion, were the leaders simply giving their opinion, or was there something more to their discouraging words than *“simple personal opinion?”* Does the Lord God in heaven allows us to have an opinion? At what point does one’s opinion become something more (become sin)

that can cause one to anger the Lord God in heaven?

ספר במדבר פרק יד Bamidbar / Numbers 14:20-25

כ וַיִּמַּח הָאֱלֹהִים הַשְּׂמֵנָה הַזֹּאת
וְהַתְּרַחֵם וְהַתְּרַחֵם וְהַתְּרַחֵם
וְהַתְּרַחֵם וְהַתְּרַחֵם וְהַתְּרַחֵם
[שְׁנֵי] וְהַתְּרַחֵם וְהַתְּרַחֵם
כא וַיִּעַלּוּ וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת-הָאֲרָץ
מִמִּדְבַּר-צֹן עַד-רְחֹב לְבָא חֲמַת:
כב וַיִּעַלּוּ בְּנֹגֵב וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד-חֲבֵרוֹן
וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶחָדָם וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ
וְהַתְּרַחֵם וְהַתְּרַחֵם וְהַתְּרַחֵם
לְפָנָי צִעֲזוּ מִצְרָיִם: כג וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד-
נַחַל אֲשַׁכּוֹל וַיִּכְרְתוּ מִשָּׁם זְמוּרָה
וְאֶשְׁכּוֹל עֲנָבִים אֶחָד וַיִּשְׁאַהּוּ
בְּמוֹט בְּשָׁנָיִם וּמֵן-הָרְמָנִים וּמֵן-
הַתְּאֵנִים: כד לְמַקּוֹם הַזֶּה הוּא קְרָא
נַחַל אֲשַׁכּוֹל עַל אֲדוֹת הָאֲשַׁכּוֹל
אֲשֶׁר-כָּרְתוּ מִשָּׁם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
כה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ מִתּוֹר הָאֲרָץ מִקֵּץ
אֲרֻבַּעַיִם יוֹם:

14:20 So the Lord said, 'I have pardoned them according to your word; 14:21 but indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord. 14:22 'Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, 14:23 shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it. 14:24 'But My servant Caleb, because he has had a different spirit and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land which he entered, and his descendants shall take possession of it. 14:25 'Now the Amalekites and the Canaanites live in the valleys; turn tomorrow and set out to the wilderness by the way of the Red Sea.' (NASB)

The narrative in the Torah from *Bamidbar / Numbers 14:20-25* sates that the leadership saw the power of God (*the glory of the Lord in Egypt and the wilderness*) and therefore should not fear, however, the Scriptures say they had a different spirit than Caleb and Joshua. The difference was that Caleb and Joshua both held fast to the Lord, trusting in Him. Notice how trusting, having faith, and fearing the Lord is drawn into context of seeing the Promised Land and receiving the promises of God. The evil report the leaders brought to the people is found in *Bamidbar / Numbers 13:25-33*.

Bamidbar / Numbers 13:25-33

13:25 When they returned from spying out the land, at the end of forty days, 13:26 they proceeded to come to Moses

and Aaron and to all the congregation of the sons of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; and they brought back word to them and to all the congregation and showed them the fruit of the land. 13:27 Thus they told him, and said, 'We went in to the land where you sent us; and it certainly does flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. 13:28 'Nevertheless, the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large; and moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak there. 13:29 'Amalek is living in the land of the Negev and the Hittites and the Jebusites and the Amorites are living in the hill country, and the Canaanites are living by the sea and by the side of the Jordan.' 13:30 Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, 'We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will surely overcome it.' 13:31 But the men who had gone up with him said, 'We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us.' 13:32 So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, 'The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size. 13:33 'There also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.' (NASB)

The leaders brought back some fruit from the Land to show the people how good the Land was. The people did not need to use their imaginations to see the good of the Land. The evil report brought to the people said there were giants who were native to the land of Canaan using the word נפילים (Nephilim) in the description of the people. The leaders drew a parallel from the Torah to the Time of Noah and the great wickedness of man, the mighty warriors that are described in Noah's time as the נפילים (Nephilim, see *Bereshit / Genesis 6:4*). Using the “*Nephilim*” terminology, the men of Israel described the inhabitants of Canaan as men who were professional killers, men of war. The metaphoric use of these words to describe large and mighty men (*giants*) in the land of Canaan is also

found elsewhere in the Tanach, in *Amos 2:9* where the Lord reminds the prophet that he “*destroyed the Amorites before you, whose height was as the height of cedar trees*” (אנכי השמדתי את האמרי מפניהם אשר כגבה ארזים) (גבהו וחסן הוא כאלונים ואשמיד פרו ממעל ושרשיו מתחת: מפ-). The metaphoric phrase in Amos saying the “*height was as the height of cedar trees*” (מפ- גבהו) does not mean these Anakim were literally the size of trees. The wording illustrates that these people were tall and the Lord is the One who fought the battles and won, the Lord enabled Israel to overcome their enemies no matter their size, and similarly He enables us to overcome as well. Based upon the description from the leadership in *Bamidbar / Numbers 13* the people are drawing a connection to *Bereshit / Genesis 6:4*. Note that at this time recorded in *Bamidbar / Numbers 14-15*, the people would not have had a copy of the Torah for themselves to read, Moshe was teaching them and reading from the Torah that he was in the process of writing. The context of “*the Nephilim were on the earth in those days*” (*prior to the Flood*) is important since it brings with it the imagination of the people of Canaan being like the נפילים (Nephilim), the mighty men of war who were, according to one’s imagination, almost mythical in nature, strength, and cruelty.

According to the Torah account in *Bamidbar / Numbers 13*, Anak (ענק) and the descendents of Anak, the Anakim (אנקים, Anakites) were known because of their strength and height. According to the interpretation of these spies they are considered to be a race of giant people whom the leadership calls the נפילים (Nephilim). Searching the MT, the word נפילים (Nephilim) is written with a defective spelling (הַנְּפִלִים) which occurs 10 times in the Tanach. In addition, it is important to note that in the Aramaic Targum, the word הַנְּפִלִים (Nephilim) is placed within the context of mighty warriors using the word גִּבְרָיָא (Gibarayah). The word גִּבְרָיָא (Gibarayah) is a lone word from the Hebrew הגִּבּוֹרִים (Gibborim) meaning “*mighty man*” or “*strong man.*” The word גִּבְרָיָא (Gibarayah) is translated as “*heroes*” or “*strong men of war.*” These words would have elicited fear rather than encouragement. The leaders had given their opinion and in doing so went to great lengths and effort to discourage the people in this particular way. The Targum Pseudo Jonathan illustrates the effort that went into the leadership’s discouraging the people saying, “*And Kaleb stilled the people, and made them listen to Moshe, and said:*

Let us go up and possess it, for we are able to take it. [JERUSALEM. And he stilled.] But the men who had gone up with him said, We are not able to go up to the people, for they are stronger than we. And they brought out an evil report about the land which they had surveyed, to the sons of Israel, saying, The country through which we have passed to explore it is a land that killeth its inhabitants with diseases; and all the people who are in it are giants, masters of evil ways. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, of the race of the giants; and we appeared to ourselves to be as locusts; and so we appeared to them.” According to the Targum’s description of these events, the leaders said the country kills the inhabitants by the way of diseases suggesting also that the Land was not good.

In the Torah portion, previously, the Lord said that because of their disobedience these last ten times, He will strike them with pestilence and dispossess them. It was as if the Lord is saying, you should be more afraid of me rather than the Land and these people. Due to these events, Moshe Prays in *Bamidbar / Numbers 14:17-20*.

Bamidbar / Numbers 14:17-20

14:17 ‘But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, 14:18 ‘The Lord is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations. 14:19 ‘Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.’ 14:20 So the Lord said, ‘I have pardoned them according to your word; (NASB)

Note how Moshe states “*let the power of the Lord be great*” and then calls upon the mercy and grace of God to forgive the iniquity of the people. These men gave an evil report and attempted to discourage the people to cause them to disobey the command to enter and possess the Land. This resulted in sin and the Lord desired to destroy all of the people for their sins. Moshe sought the Lord in prayer to forgive their sins. The Lord forgave their sins according to *Bamidbar / Numbers 14:20*. The rabbis comment on this verse in the *Talmud Bavli Berekhot 32a and Sforno* (Obadiah

ben Jacob, 1475-1550, Jewish commentator) state the following.

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 32a

Whence is it that the Holy One, blessed be He, afterwards yielded to Moses? As it is said, “And the Lord said, I have forgiven according to thy word” (ibid. v. 20).

Sforno on Bamidbar / Numbers 14:20

סלחתי כדברך. As you said when I mentioned smiting them all with pestilence. Even when I said this, I had not intended to smite them all simultaneously; I had intended to let them all die, little by little, in the desert, preventing them from crossing to the land of Canaan.

Sforno interprets the Lord’s desire to strike the people as not doing so to all of the people at once, but only little by little so as not to utterly destroy them in the wilderness for the sake of the future generation. The idea might be that our opinions may influence future generations. How so? By our children learning our opinion and walking according to those opinions. Israel had seen the glory of God according to *Bamidbar / Numbers 14:22* ‘*Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice (NASB)* and for this reason they should have placed their faith, hope, and trust in the Lord, but instead they have tested the Lord ten times and did not listen to His voice. They chose to slander both Moshe and Aaron in their hearts all night long and the Lord heard them.

The Mishnah and Rashbam speak about *Bamidbar / Numbers 14:22* saying the following:

Mishnah Arakhin 3:5

Mishnah Arakhin: The law of the defamer is sometimes lenient and sometimes strict. How so? Whether he defamed a girl from among the best of the priestly stock or the humblest in Israel, he must pay one hundred selaim. Thus it turns out that one who speaks with one’s mouth [is fined] more than one that commits an act. For thus we have also

found that the judgment against our ancestors in the wilderness was sealed only because of their evil tongue, as it is written: “Yet you have tested Me these ten times, and you have not listened to My voice” (Numbers 14:22). במוציא שם רע להקל ולהחמיר כיצד, אחד שהוציא שם רע על הגדולה שבכהנה ועל הקטנה שבישראל, נותן מאה סלע. נמצא האומר בפיו יתר מן העושה מעשה. שכן מצינו שלא נחתם גזר דין על אבותינו במדבר אלא על לשון הרע, שנאמר (במדבר יד) וינסו אתי זה עשר פעמים ולא שמעו בקולי.

Rashbam on Bamidbar / Numbers 14:22

עשר פעמים, not literally, but meaning “many times.” We have encountered such expressions in Genesis 31:7 as well as in Leviticus 26:26 and in Job 19:3 In neither instance is the word עשר to be understood literally.

Mishnah Pirkei Avot 5:4

Ten miracles were performed for our ancestors in Egypt, And ten [miracles were performed] at the [Reed] Sea. (Ten plagues did the Holy One, blessed be He, bring upon the Egyptians in Egypt, And ten [plagues did God bring] at the [Reed] Sea.) [With] ten trials did our ancestors test the Holy One, Blessed be He, in the Wilderness, As it is said (in Numbers 14:22): “Yet have they tested Me these ten times, And have not hearkened to My voice.”

It is interesting the context the rabbis place upon their interpretation on *Bamidbar / Numbers 14:22*, parallels the rabbinic thoughts on lashon hara. The *Mishnah Arakhin 3:5* says “*be’motzi shem ra*” (במוציא שם רע), speaking of the defamer. These terms are related, “*hotzaat shem ra*” or “*hotzaat diba*” meaning “*spreading a bad name,*” “*motzi shem ra*” meaning “*to send out a bad name,*” and “*rekhilut*” which refers to “*talebearing that incites hatred and resentment.*” Note also that all of these terms are related to the Hebrew term “*lashon hara*” (לשון הרע) the halakhic term for derogatory speech about another person. Lashon hara differs from defamation in that its focus is on the use of true speech for a

wrongful purpose, so that falsehood and harm are the result. Note how this parallels the words of the leadership on their return from spying out the Land. They did see the good of the Land and that the inhabitants were tall. Their purpose however was to make wrongful accusation against God, that He was unable to deliver the inhabitants of Canaan into Israel's hands. Speech is considered to be lashon hara if it says something negative about a person or party, that is not previously known to the public, is not seriously intended to correct or improve a negative situation, and is true. In this case from the Torah, the issue was the defamation of the Name of God by making Canaan appear impossible to conquer. The rabbis in the Mishnah state that it does not matter whether one has slandered a girl from the best of the priestly stock, to the humblest in Israel, meaning that one's societal status is immaterial to the sin of lashon hara, one who commits lashon hara remains guilty before God. The point of Rashbam's commentary was that עֶשֶׂר פְּעָמִים *"many times"* meant the Lord had forgiven the people many times. The *Mishnah Pirkei Avot 5:4* parallels the ten times God forgave Israel to ten miracles the Lord performed for the people by reason of the plagues in Egypt and at the Red Sea, and correspondingly the people testing God ten times in the wilderness. The lashon hara against the Land and the Name of God was the sin that increased their iniquity before God. Their hearts were set against going into Canaan indicated by their grumbling all night long, and so their hearts were determined to not listen to the voice of God. .

The law of the slanderer and the grumbling of the people all night long also reminds us of the previous story in the Torah of Aaron and Miriam (see *Bamidbar / numbers 12*). Both Aaron and Miriam were also not above the sin of grumbling. According to *Bamidbar / Numbers 12:1-2* the grumbling had something to do with Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married. The details of the complaint is related to Moshe's leadership, indicated by its close proximity to the leadership who complained against Canaan. The complaint Aaron and Miriam had was related to a prophet, where both Miriam and Aaron were prophets, they had both personally received a prophetic word from the Lord. The MT indicates that they had begun to resent Moshe's sole leadership role over Israel saying, *"Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?"* (*Bamidbar / Numbers 12:2*) Notice what is written in *Bamidbar / Numbers 12:1-2, 12:1 Then Miriam and*

Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had married a Cushite woman); 12:2 and they said, 'Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?' *And the Lord heard it. (NASB)* This appears to be a private conversation between Aaron and Miriam because the Scriptures say “*And the Lord heard it.*” The question is, how often do we indulge in similar “private” conversations, forgetting that the Lord is listening? Remember Yeshua said, “*But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*” (*Matthew 12:36-37*) Because of the sin of lashon hara, the Lord struck Miriam with leprosy as a punishment. Moshe immediately interceded on her behalf and the Lord removed the leprosy but Miriam had to be put outside of the camp for seven days. The Scriptures say that only Miriam was stricken with leprosy, even though two people were involved. It may be that Miriam was the one who was performing the lashon hara. Under many circumstances, two women do not always agree, especially the opinions between a sister and a brother's spouse.

The point of this study is that the leaders returned from spying out the Land with a fearful report rather than a report of encouragement. Were the leaders simply giving their opinion, or was there something more to their discouraging words than simply their opinion? Does the Lord God in heaven allow us to have an opinion? At what point does one's opinion become something more (become sin) that can cause one to anger the Lord God in heaven?

When speaking of opinions, a more modern example may be taken from L.G.B.T activists today who are calling for churches to be forced to take homosexuality off the sin list. (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/opinion/sunday/frank-bruni-same-sex-sinners.html?_r=0) The New York Times Magazine reported on the issue of florists and bakers turning away gay people saying they do not want to provide catering services to gay weddings. According to the New York Times Magazine, Creech and Mitchell Gold, prominent furniture maker and gay philanthropists, founded an advocacy group, Faith in America, which aims to mitigate the damage done to L.G.B.T. people by what it calls “*religion-based bigotry,*” saying, “*Gold told me that church leaders must be made 'to take homosexuality off the sin list.'*” The point of this example is that when

one's opinion causes others to sin in disobedience to God's command, this is the moment at which our opinions become sin before the Lord God in heaven.

Behind every call to Teshuvah (repentance) in the Scriptures is the idea that one is to change their way of thinking to make different choices to turn from sin and to walk in God's ways of righteousness, holiness, truth, and justice, so that not only are we preparing a place for the Lord to dwell in our midst, we are also preparing ourselves to live with God in eternity (see *Missilat Yesharim on Pirkei Avot 4:21*). This was the purpose of the Lord giving us His Torah upon the mountain of Sinai. John the baptizer, Yeshua, and the rest of the Apostolic Writings invites each of us as individuals, communities, and a nation, to repentance and to newness of life by the power and Spirit of God in His Son Yeshua the Messiah. This type of life is very different from the one the rulers and authorities tell us is the norm in this world. Leaders need to teach their congregations to seek the Lord God in heaven for help to recognize when our own opinions stand contrary to His Word. We also need to be careful not to be deceived by the powers and rulers of this age under the pretense of economic ideologies or a set of lifestyle expectations that has been popularized by national television. Repentance and newness of life is at the very root of the Bible, the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings, and the life of Yeshua, His teachings, and faith in the Lord, etc. We need the help of the Lord God in heaven and according to the Scriptures, He provided the means for us to succeed, by remaining in His Word, in the Messiah, and by the receiving of His Holy Spirit. Remaining in the Word means to live it out with the help of God. And in this way we are able to escape the sin problem of personal opinion that stands contrary to the Lord and His commands.

